# The crisis of interpretation in The Book of Margery Kempe

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# 'Ye wote ful lityl what sche felyth': The Crisis of Interpretation in *The Book of Margery Kempe*

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*The Book of Margery Kempe* is different from most spiritual treatises because it does more than simply report and comment on God's words as they are relayed by the visionary.[1] Instead, it records numerous conversations and encounters that frame Margery's spiritual experience in the context of other people's reactions to her. The problem is that rather than validating the visionary's experience, these encounters often call it into question. She meets as much with perplexity and rejection as she inspires adhesion and acceptance. Instead of moving from doubt to conviction, the book's protagonist seems to ricochet back and forth between the two extremes. The book's power lies in its capacity both to depict and to provoke anxiety. It reveals a major fault line of medieval society, a zone where the authorities come into conflict and where the quest for truth

[1] In this respect the difference between Margery and Julian of Norwich is striking; see Wendy HARDING, 'Sexual Difference and the Problem of Expression in Four Late Medieval Women's Texts', in *Identités et différences*, éd. André LACOMBES, Paris: AMAES no. 17, 1992, p. 3-25. See also the contrast drawn between Bridget of Sweden's *Revelationes* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, in Rosalynn VOADEN, *God's Words, Women's Voices: the discernment of spirits in the writing of late-medieval women visionaries*, Woodbridge: Boydell; Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 1999.

seems to reach an impasse. Margery's particular form of piety draws its force from her inner experience or 'feelings'.[2] To be confirmed as authentic, these 'feelings' must be 'shown' to clerical authorities. But two major obstacles render this procedure problematic. First, there seems to be no way to bring certainty to this hermeneutic process and to reconcile the different evaluations of her experience, since they seem to be based on competing, but equally powerful, regimes of authority. Secondly, Margery's inner experience is frequently figured as unrepresentable; she does not have the vocabulary to translate it for her judges. The book documents a crisis in both interpretation and expression.

The organisation of the book is unusual enough to have provoked the scribe's comment that the '*tribulacyons*' it tells of are reported '*not in ordyr as it fellyn but as the creatur cowd han mend of hem*' (6). Nevertheless, while the text may not correspond to recognisable literary conventions, patterns emerge in the episodes that Margery remembers and singles out for retelling.[3] Her account of her spiritual life takes the form of a recurring cycle of dread and relief. This accounts in part for the discomfort it provokes when we read it. If we were to plot her emotional state like a

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[2] The *Book*'s Preface describes how Margery was encouraged to create 'a booke of hyr felyngys & hir reuelacyons' (3). References to feelings recur numerous times throughout the manuscript. All references are to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, eds Sanford Brown MEECH and Hope Emily ALLEN, EETS OS 212, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1940. All references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[3] Sue Ellen HOLBROOK's insightful reading of the text illustrates how one of its 'organizing mechanisms ... is the use of four salient points of reference around which to cluster events and images: sex, words, food, and tears'. See her essay, 'Order and Coherence in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,' in *The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, and Imagination*, eds. Constance BERMAN, Charles W. CONNELL, and Judith Rice ROTHSCHILD, Morgantown: West Virginia UP, 1985, p. 97-110: 97.

temperature chart, it would show frequent peaks and drops. This cycle is mapped out by repetitions in the text, as expressions of mental or spiritual anxiety give rise to verbal exchanges aimed at calming fear. Though the recurrent formulae could be explained as a sign of the book's oral composition, they compel the reader's attention. One of Margery's most reassuring interlocutors is Christ, who frequently advises her not to be afraid. His command, '*Drede the[e] nowt*' recurs 19 times (17; 22; 26; 30; 30; 38; 48; 51; 62; 75; 76; 85; 91; 92; 93; 99; 100; 213; 216), but despite this reassuring refrain, Margery regularly experiences further terrors linked to doubts about her spiritual or material welfare. Since these '*tribulacyons*' (6) figure as a central theme of the book, I will now examine the circumstances that surround them in order to locate them in the context of late medieval experience.

Margery's book begins with a physical and spiritual crisis. A difficult first pregnancy makes the protagonist conscious of her mortality and, thanks to the Church's instruction, her fear of death quickly turns to fear of eternal damnation, prompting her to seek the help of her confessor. A sin that she has been unwilling to confess weighs on her conscience, and so she seeks absolution. The priest has a remedy for Margery's fear, but the exchange between penitent and confessor increases rather than diminishes the terror of eternal torment:

> 'And, whan sche cam to the poynt for to seyn that thing whech sche had so long conselyd, hir confessowr was a lytyl to hastye and gan scharply to undyrnemyn hir er than sche had fully seyd hir entent…' (7).

The cleric's hasty judgement and sharp reproofs render Margery incapable of continuing with her confession. The confessor is thus unable to bring the sacrament to completion due to the confessant's silence: '*and so sche wold no mor seyn for nowt he mygth do*' (7). Faced with alternatives that are represented as equally terrifying, divine retribution or clerical castigation, Margery descends into a state that is represented both as madness and diabolic possession:

> 'And a-noon for dreed sche had of dampnacyon on the to syde and hys scharp reprevyng on that other side, this creatur went owt of hir mende and was wondyrlye vexid and labowryd wyth spyritys half yer viiij wekys and odde days' (7).

Margery's disastrous experience in confession vividly dramatizes a problem inherent in that particular sacrament. Whereas all the other sacraments can be performed adequately regardless of the competence of the cleric, confession requires that the practitioner have a special aptitude for interpersonal exchanges. Although confession was an important part of the inward turn of Christian devotion, not all confessors were competent to elicit their parishioners' deepest secrets, nor to give the appropriate penance for their sins. Of course, the Fourth Lateran council's institution of annual confession as a requirement prompted the production of numerous penitential manuals aimed at instructing the clergy in this aspect of their work. Still, despite attempts to systematize confessional exchanges, the sacrament remained inherently personal, distinctive and 'unscripted',[4] and

[4] See Alexander MURRAY, 'Counselling in Medieval Confession', in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, eds. Peter BILLER and A.J. MINNIS, Rochester, New York: York Medieval Press in association with the Boydell Press, 1998, p. 63-78: 67.

therefore problematic, since confessors were liable to make divergent judgements and thus to reveal that clerical authority was not unified and monolithic but variable and contingent.

After the failed exchange with the parish priest, the book documents Margery's quest for trustworthy spiritual counsellors, a search that is never quite resolved in the book. Initially, though, the sinner seems to bypass the clergy and receive absolution directly from God. A healing exchange with Christ remedies the disastrous consequences of the confessor's harsh words. This divine conversation seems to restore Margery to a state of grace: '*this creatur was thus gracyowsly comen ageyn to hir mende*' (9). After being '*labowryd wyth spyritys*' Margery is '*strengthyd in alle hir spyritys*' (8). Christ seems to represent the ideal confessor, speaking from and in the penitent's heart.

Nevertheless, the language representing this change is only tentative, since the adverbial form '*gracyowsly*' suggests a style of comportment as much as a sacramental transformation. Though the conversation with Christ reassures Margery, and '*sche thowt sche was bowndyn to God*' (9), her restored confidence is only temporary. Indeed, the use of the reporting verb 'she thought' introduces subjectivity and hence doubt. An individual's thoughts can be erroneous, as readers soon learn when Margery's piety turns into a form of presumption:

> 'Sche thowt that sche lovyd God mor than he hir. Sche was smet wyth the dedly wownd of veynglory and felt it not' (14).

The mention of this deadly wound echoes confessional manuals in naming the sinful thought and comparing it to an injury that implicitly needs to be treated by a spiritual doctor. Thus, Margery's text retrospectively judges and condemns her extravagant thought.

Indeed, *The Book of Margery Kempe* shows that inner convictions are ambivalent, untrustworthy, and easily reversible. After two years of '*gret qwiete of spyryt*' (13), Margery's mood changes. Adulterous thoughts make her fear damnation: '*Sche thowt sche wold a ben in Helle for the sorw that sche had*' (16). Frequent confession does nothing to alleviate her doubt. She trusts neither the clergy nor Christ himself:

> 'And therfore wend sche that he had forsakyn hir and durst not trostyn to hys mercy, but was labowrd wyth horrybyl temptacyons of lettherye and of dyspeyr' (16).

This torment continues until her confidence is restored by another celestial vision in which Christ assures her that she shall be saved.

Still, the divine promise of '*the blysse of Heuyn*' (16-17) does not prevent the return of doubt, nor does it obviate the requirement that Margery submit her inner experience to an authority for judgement. Christ commands Margery to go to a confessor who will serve as a mediator between them:

> ' . . . And I byd the gon to the ankyr at the Frer Prechowrys, and **schew hym** my prevyteys and my cownselys **which I schewe to the**, and werk aftyr hys cownsel, for **my spyrit schal speke in hym to the**'. Than this creatur went forth to the ankyr, as sche was comawndyd, and **schewyd hym** the revelacyons swech **as wer schewyd** to hir. (17) [My emphasis]

In a complex chain of communication, what Christ reveals to Margery, she must reveal to the confessor, who is then to advise her according to divine guidance. In the transfer from one authority to another, from the supreme authority perceived in the vision to his representative on earth, there is room for doubt to surface.

Indeed, there is an important difference between Christ's orders and the anchorite's interpretation of them. Christ tells Margery to reveal the divine secrets and counsel that she hears in her revelations and to listen in turn to her confessor's advice. The confessor goes a little farther, placing Margery's experience in the framework of the contemporary theological debate about the discernment of spirits, a discourse that Dyan Elliott has described as 'a "top-down" initiative to contain female spirituality.'[5] The anchorite casts himself in the authoritative position of interpreter and judge:

> '... I charge yow receyveth swech thowtys whan God wyl geve hem as mekely and as devowtly as ye kan and comyth to me and **tellyth me what thei be, and I schal**, wyth the leve of ower Lord Jhesu Cryst, **telle yow whether thei ben of the Holy Gost or ellys of yowr enmy the devyl**'. (18) [My emphasis]

His words are strangely contradictory, for while he initially accepts the thoughts as God-given, he then presumes to judge whether they are divinely or diabolically inspired. His own authority as spiritual advisor and expert in the discernment of spirits depends on his raising doubts concerning the provenance of Margery's visions and the truth of Christ's

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[5] See http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.1/ah0102000026.html, last consulted June 15, 2010: Dyan ELLIOTT, 'Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits, and Joan of Arc', *The American Historical Review*, 107.1 (2002).

revelations to her.

Unlike the first confessor, the anchorite is one of the numerous sympathizers that Margery's book describes; however, there are as many detractors who take her visions and expressions to be the work of the devil rather than Christ. Margery's cycle of dread and confidence is closely connected to the interpretations of her experience that others offer. She is at the centre of a struggle between competing authorities. On one side are the clerics who are suspicious of the new affective piety and particularly of female practitioners. These men insist on the authority of the pulpit and the written word. On the other side are those who favour a more emotive, feminine kind of piety. The anchorite to whom Christ refers her could be placed in the latter group, if we judge by his initial response to Margery's revelations:

> 'Than the ankyr wyth gret reverns and wepyng, thankyng God, seyd, "Dowtyr, ye sowkyn evyn on Crysts brest, and ye han an ernest peny of hevyn..."' (17-18).

The man's tears together with his employment of the trope of Christ as Mother suggest his adhesion to the new affective strain in Christianity.[6] Margery is caught in the crossfire between competing definitions of piety. Even if her visions emanate from a higher authority than that of the clerics, they are nonetheless subject to their judgement, and that judgement is equivocal.

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[6] See Carolyn Walker BYNUM, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 16, Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1982.

In charting Margery's emotional ups and downs and describing the different responses to them, her book addresses an area of anxiety and confusion in late medieval culture. The Church encouraged various forms of inwardness, urging the faithful to examine their spiritual states in confession and to mediate on Christ's life through practices that demanded affective involvement. These new forms of piety offered a culturally appropriate avenue of spiritual growth for medieval women. Nonetheless, women were seen as weaker and more easily swayed than men. The thoughts and feelings inspired by their meditations were ambivalent signs pointing either to election or to damnation. The new devotion confronted the clergy with the problem of controlling and channelling the powerful emotional expressions that resulted. The clergy held the responsibility of confirming or denying the feelings, revelations and intuitions that visited the faithful. Yet, as Margery's book amply shows, the authorities were not by any means unanimous in their judgement. The ambiguous, subjective area of feelings and thoughts produced differences in appreciation.

At the same time, communication is an interactive process, and failures occur on both sides. Margery's difficulty representing her feelings complicates the task of interpreting them. The book's repeated scenes of conversation and interpretation illustrate the impossibility of adequately reporting visionary experience as well as interpreting it. Accounts of Margery's visions and thoughts frequently end with the topos of inexpressibility, drawing attention to ellipses in the text.[7] We read, for

[7] Leo CARRUTHERS discusses these expressions in '"The spyrit of God that spekyth in thy soul": Margery Kempe and the Rhetoric of Mystical Experience', in *Médiévales 44: Mélanges de langue, littérature et civilisation offerts à André Crépin à l'occasion de son*

example, how at Mass one Palm Sunday when Margery thinks on the Harrowing of Hell, her inner experience is impossible to record in full:

> 'Sche had many an holy thowt and many an holy desyr whech sche cowde nevyr tellyn ne rehersyn ne hir tunge myth nevyr expressyn the habundawnce of grace that sche felt ...' (187).

On another occasion, in Rome, Margery sees a mother and child, a sight which inspires '*so many of holy thowtys that sche myth nevyr tellyn the halvendel*' (94). Margery is incapable of finding words to represent either the bliss of heavenly grace, or the pain of compassion:

> Than the creatur say [saw] owr Lord fallyn down by hys modyr and comfortyn hir as he myth **wyth many swete wordys**. Whan sche herd the wordys and sey the compassyon that the modyr had of the sone and the sone of hys modyr, than sche wept, sobbyd, and criyd as thow sche schulde a deyid for pité and compassyon that sche had of that petows syght and the holy thowtys that sche had in the menetyme, the whech wer so sotyl and hevynly that **sche cowde nevyr tellen hem aftyr** so as sche had hem in felyng (191). [My emphasis]

In Margery's vision Christ has many sweet words to comfort his mother, whereas the visionary is incapable of expressing her feelings. There are no words to attach to '*the holy thowtys*'; instead, she expresses herself through tears, for which the book has an impressive lexicon. In this passage we find three synonyms, '*wept, sobbyd, and criyd*'. Elsewhere the vocabulary is more violent: '*Than this creatur brast al in-to wepyng*' (94);

> 'sche cryed, sche roryd, sche wept, sche fel down to the grownd ... with boistows sobbyngys, wepyngys, and lowde cryes' (147).

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*quatre-vingtième anniversaire*, éds. Danielle BUSCHINGER & Arlette SANCERY, Amiens: Presses de l'Université de Picardie (Centre d'Études Médiévales), 2008, p. 95-104.

There are frequent expressions of plenty or excess:

> 'Her dalyawns was so swet, so holy, and so devowt that this creatur myt not oftyntymes beryn it but fel down and wrestyd wyth hir body and mad wondyrful cher and contenawns wyth boystows sobbyngys and gret plenté of terys' (40).

In spite of the variety of words to describe this wordless demonstration of feeling, the final impression is of the text's repetitiveness, since the only outlet for Margery's thoughts and feelings seems to be through the channel of her bodily expression.

Margery's distinctive forms of expression partly account for the conflicting responses she elicits. Her wordless manifestations of feeling meet with contradictory interpretations. Margery's tears, her fainting, her writhing, even her silence, qualify as semiotic behaviour that her contemporaries must try to understand. The text sets their responses in contrast with one another. Her emotional outbursts during sermons, for example, meet with both acceptance and blame. One '*worschepful doctor*' compares her to a holy woman he has read about whose weeping is a token of '*gret grace*' (165-166). A preacher gives her the benefit of the doubt, quieting his congregation with words that stress the indeterminacy of her emotional displays: '*Frendys, beth stille, ye wote ful lityl what sche felyth*' (167). By contrast, a friar bans her from the church while he is preaching, so that Margery's subsequent fits of tears provoke censure:

> 'meche of the pepil wondryd on hir and bannyd and cursyd hir ful sor, supposyng that sche myth a left hir crying yyf sche had wolde, inasmech as the good frer had so prechyd ther ageyn, as is beforn wretyn' (167).

In an ironic reversal that the narrative underlines, Margery's silence receives the same negative judgement as her tears:

> 'And, as summe spoke evyl of hir aforn for sche cryed, so sum spoke now evyl of hir for sche cryid not' (156).

Adding to this general atmosphere of contradiction and uncertainty, Margery herself doubts her feelings:

> **Sumtyme sche** was in gret hevynes for hir felyngys, whan sche knew not how thei schulde ben undirstondyn many days togedyr, for **drede** that sche had of deceytys and illusyons, that hir thowt sche wolde that hir hed had be smet fro the body tyl God of hys goodnesse declaryd hem to hir mende. **For sumtyme that sche** undirstod bodily it was to ben undirstondyn gostly, and the **drede** that sche had of hir felyngys was the grettest scorge that sche had in erde and specialy whan sche had hir fyrst felyngys, and that **drede** made hir ful meke for sche had no **joye** in the felyng tyl sche knew be experiens whethyr it was trewe er not. (220) [My emphasis]

The parallelism of the sentences ('*Sumtyme ... For sumtyme ...*') recalls other passages that contrast divergent interpretations.[8] Here, though, the opposition is within the protagonist's own mind, as she hesitates between her dread that the feelings are diabolic illusions and her joy in divine visitations. The conflict among the authorities plays out within Margery's own thoughts, creating a tug of war between dread and joy. She also seems to experience a conflict between feeling and understanding, made wonderfully concrete in the metaphor of the head being smitten from the

[8] See for example the description of the responses to Margery's business failures (10-11).

body. Her dilemma responds to the clerical conviction that emotional or '*bodily*' truths are inferior to spiritual or '*ghostly*' ones.

In one of Margery's visions, Christ offers a demonstration that points the way out of her interpretative dilemma. He refuses Margery's prayer that he take away her tears or at least that he allow them to come in private so that she will be spared public castigation. Instead, he explains the workings of divine power and gives a lesson in the construal of signs:

> Dowtyr, thu seist how the planetys ar buxom to my wil, that sumtyme ther cum gret thundirkrakkys and makyn the pepil ful sor afeerd. And sumtyme, dowtyr, thu seest how I sende gret levenys that brennyn chirchys and howsys. Also sumtyme thu seest that I sende gret wyndys that blowyn down stepelys, howsys, and trees owt of the erde and doth mech harm in many placys, and **yet may not the wynd be seyn but it may wel be felt**. And ryth so, dowtyr, I fare wyth the myth of my Godheed; **it may not be seyn wyth mannys eye, and yyt it may wel be felt** in a sympil sowle wher likyth to werkyn grace, as I do in thi sowle. And, as sodeynly as the levyn comith fro hevyn, so sodeynly come I into thy sowle, and illumyn it wyth the lyght of grace and of undirstandyng, and sett it al **on fyr wyth lofe**, and make the fyr of lofe to brenne therin and purgyn it ful clene fro alle erdly filth. And sumtyme, dowtyr, I make erdedenys for to feryn the pepil that thei schulde dredyn me. And so, dowtyr, gostly have I don wyth the and wyth other chosyn sowlys that schal ben savyd, for I turne the erthe of her hertys upsodown and **make hem sore afeerd that thei dredyn venjawnce** schulde fallyn on hem for her synnys." (182) [My emphasis]

In this vision, Christ's words to Margery draw a correspondence between Creator and creation. Like the wind, God's might cannot be seen, but 'it may wel be felt' and its effects can certainly be seen. Like the thunder, lightning, and gales that terrify the people and damage the land, Margery's fits of crying should be read as the effects caused by an unseen spiritual

influence. This common-sense demonstration of the truth of invisible forces offers a lesson in interpretation. In this extended simile, all Margery's inner feelings, whether of terror ('*sore afeerd*') or bliss ('*on fyr wyth lofe*'), are explained as the working of divine power. The wise have only to understand them as the evidence of God's grace in her soul.

Since spiritual phenomena cannot be seen, they cannot be easily figured or interpreted. Nevertheless, rather than leading to a dead end, this indeterminacy becomes a test of faith. Margery's ideal interpreters respond not with reason and analysis, but with trust and empathy. Language, normally a means of binding together human communities, is, if anything, a barrier to the affective response that Margery demands. Abroad on her pilgrimages, she enjoys better relationships with foreigners than with English-speaking travellers, and one of her most satisfactory confessors is a German priest who, miraculously, hears Margery's confession although he knows no English. In Margery's transnational friendships, Lynn Staley sees 'an image of a Pentecostal Church, whose members are bound together by devotion, not by the Latin of ecclesiastical power'.[9] The preface of Margery's book seems to call for an extension of this benevolent community toward the book's readership:

> 'Alle the werkys of ower Saviowr ben for ower exampyl and instruccyon, and what grace that he werkyth in any creatur is ower profyth yf lak of charyté be not ower hynderawnce' (1).

[9] Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994, p. 151.

Indeed, this community of charity extends into the margins of the manuscript, where the notations of its Carthusian readers confirm Margery's expressions of love for the divinity.[10]

Modern readers of the book have not been uniformly charitable in judging Margery; in fact the discovery of the manuscript in 1934 set off a controversy that mirrors the reception Margery met with in her own time.[11] The language of obloquy changes, as early twentieth-century readers charge her with hysteria rather than heresy. The terms of praise differ too, so that some of her supporters hail not her holiness, but her resistance to authority or her privileging of the body. Responses to the book reveal the ambivalence within our own society toward femininity and extravagantly kinetic forms of devotion. Margery's words, gestures, and thoughts continue to be read as ambivalent signs that demand analysis but resist explanation.

Finally, the recurring cycle of dread and joy that shapes Margery's text seems directly connected to the difficulty of representing and interpreting the feelings that are the subject of the book. Both verbal and kinetic forms of signifying are indeterminate and hence give rise to conflicting responses. Writing is by no means exempt from this crisis of interpretation; in fact, the book's preface ostentatiously figures forth its problematic nature. Given the impossibility of expressing inner experience,

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[10] See Sanford Brown MEECH's comments on these marginal notations in his 'Introduction' to *The Book of Margery Kempe* (xxxvi-xlvi).

[11] Hope Emily ALLEN's ambivalent response to the book's protagonist illustrates Margery's capacity to provoke division: 'she was petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously overstrained; devout, much-travelled, forceful and talented' (p. lxiv).

one has to wonder about the purpose of the book. It may be that the book is partly inspired by the naïve impulse to stabilize meaning.

Although Margery's life is still ongoing at the end of the book, its ups and downs conclude on a positive note when, in the final pages, Margery is reconciled with the latest in a long line of confessors. Still, this ending creates an unstable resolution. The power of the book, which continues to intrigue and disturb its readers, lies first of all in its evocation of the inexpressibility and unknowability of inward experience and secondly in its depiction of the struggle between the competing forces of personal intuition and official dogma. In response to a book that raises the problem of interpreting a woman's voice, I have tried to indicate some of its lines of force and zones of ambiguity. I have centred my reading on the fluctuations of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and rather than passing judgement, I have tried to listen to a voice that refuses either to be silenced or to be fixed by any interpretation.